

**‘HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL!’**  
**JOHN MONTGOMERY, PACIFIC BASIN RESEARCH CENTER DIRECTOR**

The Pacific Basin Research Center was formally launched at Soka University of America, Calabasas, on Jan. 2, 1991, under the direction of John D. Montgomery, Ford Foundation Professor of International Studies, Emeritus, Harvard University.

The PBRC has awarded more than 60 grants and post-doctoral fellowships to scholars at Harvard University and other universities studying policy experiences in Asia and the Pacific. The research has studied such issues as international security, economic and social development, educational and cultural activities, and environmental protection; it is especially interested in positive human rights policies and social capital formation in Asia and the Pacific Rim.

At the Dec. 10, 1998, SUA, Calabasas, Human Rights Day Symposium, John D. Montgomery, director of the Pacific Basin Research Center, moderated a panel presentation by four PBRC fellows on “Human Rights: Positive Policies in Asia and the Pacific Rim.” The topic of the presentation is also the title of the PBRC’s most recent book, a compilation of 15 essays developed under PBRC grants between 1994–97, exploring the consequences of affirmative action and other positive human rights policies in Asia and the Pacific Basin.

The following interview with Dr. Montgomery focuses on those findings and their significance for groups and individuals to pursue their human dignity in practical ways.

**WT:** At the SUA Human Rights Day Symposium, the PBRC panel covered different phases of human rights activity that have emerged in the 50 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Please identify those critical benchmarks and share with us their significance in creating positive human rights policies.

**John Montgomery:** The most arresting element in the half-century of the present human rights regime is the dynamic ebb and flow of support and commitment to the concept. The Declaration itself began in the euphoria of the World War II victory and the aspiration for a New World Order in which nations would join in respecting and advancing human rights and dignity. But in only a few years the distrust and tension of the Cold War set in and the world split into two camps, neither of which placed a priority on human rights. However, in the last decade or so, enthusiasm rekindled, and new commitments emerged, both in law and in the policies and norms that states began to observe.

**WT:** In your estimation, which Asian-Pacific countries are the most progressive in instituting and fostering positive human rights policies?

**Montgomery:** Countries have differed quite strikingly in their commitment to human rights. The Atlantic community led in the ratification of the major covenants; as for the rest of the world, the record shows two significant developments: All regions have steadily improved in the rankings for eliminating abuses, but the Asian region has progressed faster than the Latin American region. The performance of some countries has been quite remarkable.

For example, in spite of the persistence of the caste system, India has adopted laws and procedures that have been models to other countries in Asia. And perhaps some people will be surprised to learn that China, apart from horrid successes like Tiananmen Square and the toleration of child labor, has adopted laws protecting economic and social rights and has even begun to offer legal assistance to the disadvantaged.

**WT:** In the PBRC book *Human Rights: Positive Policies in Asia and the Pacific Rim*, one of the authors, PBRC fellow Jennifer Schirmer, describes how the families of “the disappeared” in Latin America organized to protest abuses against their relatives. How successful is this form of non-violent response in rectifying injustices, and are there other forms of compensating outcomes?

**Montgomery:** The case study that Jennifer Schirmer carried out demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The families of people in Latin America who have been tortured and even killed gathered together to demand an accounting of these atrocities and they proceeded to move beyond their own grievances to work for the human rights of all, especially women.

**WT:** Recently, the PBRC developed a Human Rights Survey in collaboration with faculty and students of the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University. The survey is unique in that it asks not for an individual’s opinions, but rather, for an individual’s actual experiences as members of a society that presumably respects human rights. What have the survey results revealed?

**Montgomery:** What we did was to reach out to people by inviting them to use the worldwide web (<http://learning.gse.upenn.edu/hr>) to respond to questions about their experience with human rights. We wanted to know not merely their opinions and attitudes but their actual experiences with them. The responses are still coming in, and the sample is still small but we have learned which rights have been most frequently abused.

The results for the United States may surprise some people, in that many are taken for granted here — travel and freedom of assembly, for example — but are seriously abridged elsewhere — China, for example. We were surprised to learn that privacy was invaded here more frequently than we had anticipated; family rights and mail, especially e-mail, were among the five rights most often abused among our respondents. There were also racial and gender differences that I found disturbing in spite of our recent progress.

**WT:** Since the SUA Human Rights Day Symposium last December, the role — and ratification — of international human rights tribunals, such as the International Criminal Court, and peace-keeping organizations, such as NATO, have become a topic of passionate debate within the world human rights community. Based on the PBRC’s research, what role do you believe these organizations will play in advancing positive human rights policies and procedures?

**Montgomery:** The most important human rights organizations are now non-governmental and non-official. There are thousands and thousands of non-governmental organizations agitating for human rights and monitoring and reporting on their observances. They have great influence in forming public opinion, which in turn influence government

and corporate policies.

The most disappointing performance to me was that of the United States. The United States has frequently attached reservations to its ratification of human rights agreements asserting that its sovereignty prevails over international norms like the tribunals that adjudicate violations and abuses. The United States does not have the best record even in the number of covenants and agreements it has signed and ratified, and to some of these to which it has committed itself, it has invented ways of weaseling out of compliance. There is still a lot to do in spite of recent progress.

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